The ethics of mediated empathy; Virtual reality and Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*

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After Facebook acquired the virtual reality company Oculus VR in 2014, Mark Zuckerberg provided an official comment: "Strategically, we want to start building the next major computing platform that will come after mobile" (as qtd in Parkin). Oculus' publicity release contained a similar sentiment: "We believe communication drives new platforms; we want to contribute to a more open, connected world and we both see virtual reality as the next step" (as qtd in Parkin). It would seem Zuckerberg and the heads of Oculus are banking on virtual reality's exciting capacity for total immersion to revolutionize the nature of contemporary human social interaction. The technology's potential to overshadow limited two-dimensional narratives has also furthered its status as the "ultimate empathy machine" ("Chris Milk," 03:12-03:13). Contributing to the claim that virtual reality technology allows participants to inhabit and identify "the emotional experience of another via technology*"* (Bollmer 63)*,* are immersive non-fiction projects, such as *The Machine to Be Another* (2012), which allows participants to virtually inhabit another age or gender, and *Notes on Blindness* (2016), which places users in the simulated world of a non-sighted person.

While proponents of VR claim the rapidly-advancing technology marks humanity's entrance into a new, prosocial era of empathic understanding, the use of

this technology to simulate the personal experiences of another through the view of a head-mounted display (HMD) has also been challenged. *C*ritics go on to argue there are also inherent problems associated with eliciting empathic experiences within a commercial virtual spectacle. In his seminal work, *The Society of the Spectacle,* Guy Debord offers reflections regarding capitalist society's rampant inversion of what is real and what is false representation. "In societies where modern conditions of production prevail," Debord writes, "all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles" (119). Considering that the market for virtual and augmented reality technologies is predicated to reach 72.8 billion USD by 2024 *(*Tankovska*),* VR seems poised to flood the visual media industry, bringing with it the wholesome promise of authentic human connection. In an age in which social interactions are increasingly filtered through a cluttering of technologies, however, can yet another digitally mediated viewpoint allow for the empathetic understanding of another's lived experience and emotional life? Is VR truly an emerging "empathy machine" ("Chris Milk," 03:12-03:13)? Or is this "psychologically advanced medium" (Bailenson 12) just the latest iteration of Debord's commodified spectacle?

EMOTIONAL RESONANCE IN VISUAL MEDIA

Visual media has an undeniable capacity to evoke powerful emotions in the viewer (although how exactly this occurs continues to be widely debated). One of the first to recognize the affective power of the cinema was German-American psychologist Hugo Munsterburg, who wrote, "The visual perception … of these emotions fuses in our minds with the conscious awareness of the emotion expressed;

we feel as if we were directly seeing and observing the emotion itself" (qtd in Rosca 73). Film theoretician Bela Balázs further investigated this sense of psychological embodiment, opening the doors for the study of emotional spectatorship. As Balázs claims, "In the cinema … we are seeing everything from the inside as it were and are surrounded by the characters of the film. They need not tell us what they feel, for we see what they see and see it as they see it" (qtd in Rosca 103). According to Balázs, the viewer is required to project themselves into the framed narrative in order to identify with a film's characters. Although there are many differing interpretations of this phenomenon, Balázs' concept of "identification" seems to best account for an audience's emotional connection with the characters onscreen. Balázs' infers that, in order for spectator engagement to occur, there must be a reduction of the "distance between the spectator and the work of art" (qtd in Rosca 104). Interestingly, this seems to echo VR's immersive character which does away with this psychological separation altogether.

Where traditional filmic storytelling requires the spectator to actively project themselves into the world of the film, VR's frameless perspective breaks the "dictatorship of the frame" ("Carne y Arena: Art and Technology," 16:25-16:30) and envelops the viewer within a 360 degree environment. This sense of "being there," commonly referred to as "presence," is a vital part of convincing a user they are truly inhabiting a virtual space. Adrianao D'Aloia writes of the emerging medium's limitless field-of-view: "[VR] simultaneously offers a mental extension that is a media extension (the medium subsumes the body and by taking it somewhere else, in fact does away with it) and a mental incorporation that is a media incorporation (the body appropriates

the medium in an almost organic way, and in doing so does away with it: the screen is everywhere and therefore no longer exists) (para 23). This sensorial immersion also increases a user's perspective-taking ability by eliminating outside distractions. This inevitably leads to a more immediate, empathic connection with the characters encountered inside these experiences — or so proponents of VR ardently maintain.

In a 2015 TED Talk, VR champion and developer, Chris Milk, made several prophetic statements about the future of virtual reality in which he distinguished it from other forms of visual media. Speaking of his short 360 degree documentary, *Clouds Over Sidra* (2015), which details a child's experience in a refugee camp, Milk says,

> When you're sitting there, in [Sidra's] room, watching her, you're not watching it through a television screen, you're not watching it through a window — you're sitting there with her. When you look down, you're sitting on the same ground that she's sitting on. And because of that, you feel her humanity in a deeper way. You empathize with her in a deeper way" ("Chris Milk," 07:39-08:03).

Since Milk's talk, further iterations of these sentiments — virtual reality as "empathy at scale" (Bailenson 93) or an "intimacy engine" (Rubin 16)— have entered into discussions regarding the virtues of this emerging visual medium.

EMPATHY

When examining the phenomenon of empathy, as Milk presents it, the depth of the concept is not immediately apparent. Further examination of this notoriously complex idea may offer some insight into the challenges of assigning meaningful interpersonal connection through an as yet underdeveloped technology.

Common understandings of empathy often include well-worn tropes, such as "walking in another's shoes" or "seeing through their eyes." A working definition of empathy might also be understood as the "capacity to let aside self-centred concerns and entertain the perspective of another individual" (Rosca 54). However, the concept has a tangled history involving many diverging interdisciplinary approaches. While an ethical and philosophical interest in the emotional lives of others can be traced back throughout the writings of Aristotle, Adam Smith and David Hume, the modern notion of empathy first originated from the nineteenth century German aesthetic theory term, "Einfühlung" — the sensation of "feeling-into" a beautiful work of art. Twentieth century philosopher Theodor Lipps was one of the first to apply this theory of emotional embodiment with inanimate art to human experiences when he began recording his observations of human gesture and noticed an instinct within himself to mimic the observed movement (Bollmer 73). Since Lipps' "simulation-projection" model, the conceptualization of empathy has continued to grow in complexity, expanding into the realms of psychology, film theory and neuroscience. In a recent article, Amy Coplan argues for a more cohesive and streamlined definition of empathy which distinguishes between "emotional contagion" (Coplan 44), which is similar to Lipp's theory of unconscious 'other mirroring,' "pseudo-empathy" (44), inward or self-oriented perspective taking, and "empathy proper," outward or other-oriented perspective taking (44). These important distinctions help clarify some of the underlying confusion surrounding the buzz word employed today.

According to Coplan, "empathy proper" — the form of empathy frequently appearing in discussions of virtual reality — is concerned with the intentional simulation

of “another’s situated psychological states while maintaining clear self–other differentiation” (44). As Coplan states, this “other- focused” conceptualization of empathy requires a concentrated level of effort and must be “generated from within” (59). “Genuine empathy is difficult to achieve,” Coplan writes, "It is a motivated and controlled process which is neither automatic nor involuntary” (58). She adds that this other-oriented form of perspective-taking is significantly more challenging to achieve with those who are not well known (such as the digitally represented individuals in certain VR experiences). With these caveats in mind, Coplan concludes by saying, “In my view, this process is the only one that can provide experiential understanding of another person or understanding of another from the “inside”’ (58). Considering the level of deliberate intentionality required to sustain an ethical, outward-focused level of empathy, it is difficult to believe that a meaningful understanding of another can truly occur after a five minute experience — regardless of how immersive it may feel at the time.

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS

However, the idea that another’s experience *can* be meaningfully understood after a brief, hyperreal VR experience, is at the heart of the claim that virtual reality is the “ultimate empathy machine” (“Chris Milk,” 03:12-03:13). Indicative of the effort to combat an increasing sense of technological alienation in contemporary society, the production of “socially responsible” (Bollmer and Guinness 32) VR content has become a trend in recent years, as evidenced by initiatives such as the Facebook / Oculus “VR for Good” campaign. Similarly, Karim Ben Khelifa’s *The Enemy* (2014) brings users into close proximity with digital representations of guerrilla combatants while Alejandro

Innaritu's *Carne y Arena* (2017) offers a multi-sensory simulation of a traumatic migrant border crossing. These experiential documentaries and nonfiction experiments are designed to stimulate empathetic responses to the VR subjects upon exposure to the visceral "truth" of their circumstances. Grant Bollmer and Katherine Guinness comment on this tendency in nonfictional VR projects to prescribe a kind of moral intersubjectivity. They state:

> VR has become firmly linked with an ideal of socially responsible forms of sensation, one that literally remakes and 'corrects' brains and perception. It relies on a politics of vision that suggests that seeing through the first-person mechanisms afforded by VR permits one to understand and act in accordance with an empathetic, cognitive knowledge that emerges from supposedly knowing what it is like to be another through the simulation of experience" (Bollmer and Guinness 32).

Classified as a corrective or "orthopaedic aesthetic" (Kester qtd in Bollmer and Guinness 32), VR experiences such as these seem to "conceive of the viewer as an inherently flawed subject whose perceptual apparatus requires correction" (Grant Kester qtd in Bollmer and Guinness 32). These virtual reality experiences also seem to bypass Coplan's notion of lasting empathy, which should originate from within as a deliberate intention and desire to understand, and not as an involuntary reaction to visually immersive narratives.

Additionally, there is a noticeable lack of any significant interaction available to participants while inside these experiences. This lack of participant agency — which encompasses little more than the ability to look or walk around their surroundings —

has been wryly referred to as the “Swayze-effect” (Burdette para 13), a reference to Patrick Swayze’s invisible presence without agency in the film *Ghost* (1990). D’Aloia illustrates the importance of interactive agency, especially within the process of human cognition: “The meaning of an experience is not reducible to structures in the brain alone but is instead the product of continual and reciprocal connections between the body (of which the brain is a part) and the environment” (para 2). More than the sensation of being within a virtual environment, real-time feedback is integral to the cognitive process — and the creation of empathy. Sarah Jones and Steve Dawkins touch on this when they write of the user experience inside Milk’s *Clouds Over Sidra,* “While there is a sense of Sidra’s life spatially and temporally, the fact that there is little actual interaction with her means that it is difficult to know what she is thinking and feeling for the majority of the filmic experience, let alone understand the totality of her existence” (Jones and Dawkins 304).

Similar to this absence of meaningful interaction, the underlying goal of virtually approximating someone else’s experiences has been labeled an insidious form of technological appropriation. As Bollmer and Guinness write, “Technological simulation cannot be empathetic because, rather than allowing one to acknowledge the experience of another, it merely absorbs another’s experience into one’s own, assimilating another into one’s subjectivity as if simulation is equivalent to lived experience” (Bollmer and Guinness 33). In other words, a condensed, digitally mediated experience cannot authentically replicate the inner life of another — nor should it. Bollmer goes on to write, “A story does not disclose the being of another to oneself. Rather, it allows part of their experience to become aesthetically sensible (74).”

Jake Bohrod further refines this thought when he writes of the refugee subjects in another of Milk's short documentaries, *The Displaced* (2015): *"*Their story is subsumed by *my story*, my own consciousness, the story of virtual reality itself" (para 21).

Both of these statements reveal another layer of ethical complication associated with the elicitation of empathy inside a virtual space — the confluence of empathy and visual spectacle. The merging of visual sensation and "corrective" narratives reveals itself to be especially problematic when considered alongside Debord's statement regarding the commodified spectacle's "tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly)" (120). Immersive VR projects subsume vision — humanity's "most mystifiable sense" (Debord 120) — in an attempt to simulate another's experiences with a visceral immediacy traditional film is unable to replicate. As a result, many participants may exit these ephemeral VR experiences believing they are now privy to another's authentic emotional life when, in reality, they have only absorbed a digitally-rendered approximation. As situationist and social commentator, Larry Law, writes, "Once an experience is taken out of the real world it becomes a commodity. As a commodity, the spectacular is developed to the detriment of the real. It becomes a substitute for experience" (3).

CONCLUSION

Virtual reality projects, such as Facebook's developing immersive social platform, "Horizon," seem to present a future of wide-spread virtual human connection within our grasp. Coupled with bold proclamations, such as Milk's, which classify VR as the "ultimate empathy machine" ("Chris Milk," 03:12-03:13) with the power to

“change the world,” (“Chris Milk,” 09:43-09:45) the immense possibilities of virtual realities has captured the imaginations of those who view the emerging technology as a gateway to a better humanity.

However, in a world already bursting with commodified, digital interference perhaps placing the weighty expectations of an improved humanity within yet another layer of digital mediation should be re-evaluated. In Michael Madary and Thomas Metzinger’s proposed VR ‘code of ethics,’ they write, “The potential for the global control of experiential content introduces opportunities for new and especially powerful forms of both mental and behavioural manipulation, especially when commercial, political, religious, or governmental interests are behind the creation and maintenance of the virtual worlds” (5). Debord echoes their warning when he writes, “The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life. Not only is the relation to the commodity visible but it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world” (120). Without pausing to consider the ramifications of introducing an alternative method of emotional connection, rather than an “empathy machine,” virtual reality may devolve into the most sophisticated, all-consuming and potentially dangerous commodity-spectacle humanity has created to date.

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